

Motivation for Practice

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My motivation for practice is best explained by my personal history. I do not think the family in which I was born was an accident, nor the circumstances that brought me to this point. I do not have a clear understanding of karma, but I believe karma is why I have chosen this direction, or the direction has chosen me.

Although my mother hauled the four of us to Mass every Sunday, my family was not religious. I didn't particularly like to go to Mass except on the few occasions when we arrived early, before the lights were on and before people began to file into the church. There was silence then in the beautiful, old church, and the flames in the red votives would cast shadows from the statues across the pews and along the floor. Sometimes, on the way home from school, I would stop in and sit in that silence. If God existed, he was certainly present here.

I learned in catechism that God was a loving father who would condemn a person to burn in hell for eternity if they died with a mortal sin on their soul. Missing Mass on Sunday without a good reason was a mortal sin. I also learned that if a baby died before it was baptized it would never see the face of God.

Vatican II arrived as "a breath of fresh air" and blew out the elegant Latin Mass and me along with it. I left the church, never to return, but somehow I knew I had lost something significant. I would carry that void within myself for a long time.

My father was the biggest influence on my life. He was an immigrant from the Azores, one of thirteen children, and a socialist. My father was a wonderful historian. We grew up hearing stories of strikes and picket lines. We listened with rapt attention as my father told of a general strike in the city, of workers marching through the streets chanting "The people united will never be defeated," while bashing in the windows of the factories. He told us of the police calling in reinforcements of club-wielding police arriving on horseback and beating the striking workers. He told us of the unionizing, the communists who were a part of this, and who he saw as friends of working people. My father believed the solution to the suffering in this world was Universal Socialism. He was wrong, but I grew up with a strong sense of social obligation.

We grew up in the tenement district of New Bedford's South End and attended the infamous Roosevelt Junior High School. There were fights in the school, on the grounds, and on the bus. One boy died from injuries caused by a blow to the head during a fight. Another boy sustained a broken arm when the boys were so intent on fighting that they fell into a six-foot construction ditch right around the corner from the tenement in which we lived. I remember a nerdy boy, the kind of kid who gets bullied at school, sitting behind the bus driver, where he must have thought he was safe. As soon as the bus began to roll, his school papers were snatched from his hands, ripped in half, and he was knocked to the floor by a punch to his face. He picked up his papers, and sat quietly

back in his seat, with blood dripping from his mouth onto his shirt, while the bus driver looked straight ahead. I still can see the embarrassed smile frozen on his face as we stared at each other from across the aisle.

As an adult I became involved with a Marxist-Leninist organization, and wrote for an underground newspaper, *For the People*. The focus of the organization quickly shifted from the oppressed working class, to who was sleeping with whom, and nobody much cared why. The organization eventually collapsed under the weight of its own internal contradictions, and I wandered off, abandoning all hope of political solutions to the world's problems.

My first exposure to Buddhism was watching in horror as Buddhist monks set themselves on fire, and sat motionless and burned to death in protest of the carnage that was Vietnam. I began to read Thich Nhat Hahn, Matthiessen, D.T. Suzuki, and others. There were no Buddhist groups locally, and I had no outlet for my interest, so I put it aside as I divorced the man to whom I had been married since I was a teenager, and struggled to raise my three children alone while working my way through a four-year university education. But the seed had been planted.

To escape from the stress of my unraveling life, I decided to take a trip to Southern California to visit my sister and her family. They were involved in the Nichirin Daishonin Buddhist sect, and so I took the five precepts with the Soka Gakkai International. The organization was largely based on the West Coast, and there were no active groups in my area. My practice in isolation was brief and superficial, and I soon stopped altogether as I became more and more involved with the details of my everyday life.

Sometime later, a Buddhist group, New Kadampa Tradition, with a Tibetan spiritual leader came to my town. I wasn't just excited, I was ecstatic. I joined, again took the precepts, and became a member of the Foundation Program (equivalent to a Dharma Teacher in Training.) I did everything from press releases and changing the offerings, to sweeping the floor and cleaning the toilet.

I learned so much and made many friends, for which I am still grateful. The emphasis wasn't on meditation in this tradition, but on study and talks. The practice was all in English, and I found myself focusing on the odd use of the English language, a common problem with translated material, rather than the sound of the chanting. I was struck by the opulence and literal interpretation of Buddhism by the Tibetan tradition, and by the sangha members who sat in chairs and not on cushions. The practice revolved around a dharma protector, and the Heart Sutra was not the center of the practice. I eventually left the sangha because the practice did not feel right for me; my interest had always been with the austerity and discipline of Zen.

A member of the New Kadampa Tradition happened to mention the Providence Zen Center in passing, and I tracked it down on the internet. The Zen Center wasn't what I had expected. I found the very things that attracted me to Zen, the emphasis on intuition, lack of book study, and the precision in performing daily tasks, challenged and annoyed me. I slammed headlong into my own inner demons—my lack of discipline, impatience, overinflated ego, problems

with authority, and my attachment to the pleasures of the senses. The experience was often painful and frustrating, but I found myself learning and growing and changing in ways I had never had expected.

My work history has been in the helping professions. I have worked in domestic violence, child protection, and currently in a substance abuse treatment program that is a step up from incarceration. I have seen a 21-year-old who went into cardiac arrest after overdosing on heroin, and a 32-year-old whose belly was so distended from the effects of advanced cirrhosis that she appeared nine-months-pregnant and had to be sent to a hospice to die because the doctors could no longer help her. Some women, barely out of their teens, would relapse and die of an overdose, or in some cases, tainted drugs. There were others who have never been parented properly, who had not been taught basic values, with no sense of themselves or goals in life. They filled the void with shopping at the mall, listening to TV, and crack cocaine. It's as though there is a war going on, not in Iraq, but on the streets of cities and towns in this country.

I volunteer with a local environmental group where I am out on the shoreline at 6:00 am from spring to fall, performing tests and recording data for that organization. It feels good to smell the ocean and feel the sea breezes on my face as I work. It gets me back in touch with the honesty and reality of the natural world. I have begun volunteering at a local prison teaching techniques to prisoners on stress management, dealing with such issues as anger, how people change, how to function in the world in a nonviolent way, and Zen meditation.

I am fortunate to have not experienced any major trauma in my life. Life in and of itself is trauma enough. I still cannot wrap my mind around the reality that when people die they are never seen again. Ever. I still struggle with the realization that I cannot control everything or fix everyone; that I can not even control myself. I try mightily to reconcile the fact that all emotions are pain, even my love for my children, and my eight, beautiful grandchildren. I try to live with my own angst by trying to share what Buddhism has attempted to give me, and which I am trying to absorb—an acceptance of the suffering in life; the fact that I am the originator of my own suffering; that how I perceive things is not how they are; a slowly dawning realization that I am part of a larger whole and not so special as I originally thought—and especially the gentleness and nonviolence of Buddhism.

I have found solace in becoming an engaged Buddhist; it matters to me that I work to make a difference, to live non-violently, to not eat animals, and attempt to face the many forms of violence, by working with people who are often steeped in it. I have learned that it takes more than good intentions. I have learned that sometimes what may seem to be helpful can be unintentionally harmful unless it is based on wisdom and compassion. I also know that sometimes my energy and enthusiasm get in the way of my commonsense. I have come to accept that I do not know anywhere near what I thought I knew and that how I perceive the world is part of the problem. I recognize that I need direction, and structure from experienced teachers. I think I can only find the direction I need in formal training. 